Census and Economic Information Center
Montana Department of Commerce

Release Highlight: December 9, 2008

MONTANA
Current Census Data Now Available

Counting noses in the United States began in 1790 for the purpose of determining the number of U.S. House of Representatives each state had and their subsequent congressional districts. Since then a census of the population has been conducted every ten years, depicting a snapshot of the population on Census Day.

Now in the 21st century, as the nation is undergoing many demographic, economic and social changes, the U.S. Census Bureau has initiated a new program for counting noses in a more timely and accurate manner. The American Community Survey (ACS) institutes a continuous, nationwide survey to provide policy makers with reliable and up-to-date data every year.

Planning for ACS began after the 1990 Census with the first official release of data in August 2006 with 2005 data. Replacing the so-called 'long form' of the decennial census required a staggered phase-in by population size (see table). In August 2006, 2007 and 2008, entities with populations of 65,000 or more gained the ability to monitor their social and economic trends on an annual basis.

Today, December 9, 2008, the U.S. Census Bureau enters the second phase of data releases with three-year estimates for entities with a population of 20,000 or more. With nearly 2 million annual interviews, the ACS survey is smaller than the 18 million housing units that provided long form data for Census 2000. As a result, for smaller populations, the ACS data combines population or housing data to produce reliable multi-year estimates. The data can be accessed through the U.S. Census Bureau's American FactFinder.

With any survey, rather than an 100% count, a range of uncertainty is introduced. Sampling errors occur when data are based on a sample of a population rather than the full population, as in the decennial census. With sampling errors, margins of error are identified. For all ACS estimates released in August 2006 and later, margins of error are provided. The larger the margin of error, the less reliable the data. For a more information see the ACS Compass Products – Handbooks available by clicking here.

Beginning in 2010, five-year estimates will be released for populations with less than 20,000 people, down to the block group level. The single-year and three-year estimates will also be released. For entities with 65,000 or more in population, single-year, three-year and five-year estimates will be available. Which estimate to use is dependent on whether accuracy or timeliness is needed. Multi-year estimates provide more accuracy but for high growth areas, single-year estimates can provide current data on changes in the community.

Caution is needed when comparing ACS period estimates to point-in-time data from Census 2000. For areas with consistent populations throughout the year, single-year comparisons can be made. However for areas where the population changes with the seasons, such as college towns and seasonal recreational areas, care must be taken when comparing Census 2000 to a single-year estimate.

Single-year and multi-year estimates should not be compared one to another while multi-year comparisons need to be non-overlapping periods such as 2005 – 2007 and 2008 – 2010. Please refer to the ACS Handbooks whenever comparing data produced by the ACS. The subjects included in the ACS are very similar to the long-form questions in the decennial census.

Release Schedule for ACS Data

		Year of Data Release							
Product	Population threshold	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
		Year(s) of Data Collection							
1-year estimates	65,000+	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
3-year estimates	20,000+			2005-2007	2006-2008	2007-2009	2008-2010	2009-2011	2010-2012
5-year estimates	All areas*					2005-2009	2006-2010	2007-2011	2008-2012

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

*Five-year estimates will be available for areas as small as census tracts and block groups.

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